DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 326 612 CE 056 307

AUTHOR Edelson, Paul J.
TITLE A Practical Approach to Assessing Improvements in Adult Education.
PUB DATE 90
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education (Salt Lake City, UT, October 28-November 3, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Educators; College Faculty; *Continuing Education; Educational Change; *Educational Improvement; *Educational Quality; Educational Research; *Faculty Evaluation; Higher Education; Instructional Improvement; *Teacher Selection
IDENTIFIERS State University of New York Stony Brook

ABSTRACT

Five kinds of assessment measures were used to determine whether improvements took place in the continuing education program at the State University of New York at Stony Brook as a result of a new faculty hiring plan that emphasized departmental control. The five assessment methods were: scheduling information; student evaluation of teaching data; verified anecdotes; a commissioned research study; and a study of administrators conducted by the University Senate. Each assessment measure suggested either an improvement or a positive perception of the unit. Following the change in hiring and the incentive program, there was an increase in the number of courses scheduled, in student evaluations of teaching showing better scores, and in anecdotal information that suggested that department chairs were paying heed to poor teaching evaluations brought to their attention. Additional improvements were indicated on a commissioned survey that showed a change in perspective among key decision makers and in a campus poll that reflected favorable responses to the new initiatives. (YLB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED326612

A PRACTICAL APPROACH TO ASSESSING IMPROVEMENTS IN ADULT EDUCATION

Dr. Paul Edelson, Dean
School of Continuing Education
State University of New York at Stony Brook
Stony Brook, NY 11794-4310
(516) 632-7052

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
P Edelson
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

This paper was presented at the Annual Conference of the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education (AAACE) in Salt Lake City, Utah, October 28 - November 3, 1990.

The author wishes to acknowledge the encouragement and support of Stony Brook's Faculty Instructional Support Office headed by Dr. Robert Boice.

CE056307

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

A PRACTICAL APPROACH TO ASSESSING IMPROVEMENTS IN ADULT EDUCATION

BACKGROUND

On many campuses adult and continuing education directors find themselves working within a climate of adversity. Skepticism towards the unit comes from the more traditional faculty and administrators of the college. They question the cross-disciplinary mode of faculty staffing typically found in continuing education, the reliance upon adjuncts to do a high proportion of the teaching, and the orientation towards a predominantly part-time student body enrolled in non-traditional programs. Uncertain funding, endemic to American adult education, also contributes to both an uneasy condition and concomitant feelings of vulnerability. One way of helping to diffuse this environment of criticism, and to build support for continuing education on campus, can be to make improvements in the program that will result in enhanced perceptions of program quality. Changes that address the quality of faculty teaching courses, in particular, are strategically significant since good teaching is widely viewed as intrinsic to program value. For example, finding ways to involve the regular academic departments can help enhance the support a continuing education unit receives on campus.

This paper describes an experiment in changing the manner of selecting faculty to teach in continuing education credit courses and in assessing the results. In making these changes I felt intuitively, as an administrator, that they would lead to improvements in the quality of the continuing education program and promote broader departmental participation and, consequently a greater depth of campus support. I chose five kinds of assessment to demonstrate whether or not improvements actually occurred: 1) scheduling information, 2) student evaluation of teaching (SET) data, 3) verified anecdotes, 4) a commissioned research study and, 5) a study of administrators conducted by the University Senate. The strategy of making changes in continuing education policy with the goal of improving program quality, and then assessing the outcomes, is one that other adult education directors can apply at their institutions.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

I began by searching the literature for useful precedents concerning both the general role of research in adult education. Specifically, I looked for work that had been done in assessing the impact of changing the mode of staffing continuing education instruction. A sampling showed that extant studies are only indirectly relevant to this study. On the subject of conducting research,

Apps (1985) advised continuing education policy makers to combine analyses with intuition drawing from a wide assortment of information. Rachal (1986) made a similar point that adult education research questions must be important and lead to generalizable conclusions which are applicable to practice. Regarding faculty quality in continuing education, Freedman (1987) addressed a question implicit to my research - the comparison between adjunct and traditional full time faculty. He speculated that adjuncts might be superior because of their better attitude.

In sum, research on assessing adult education faculty had thus far been overlooked. Overall, the literature sample encouraged me to conduct my own research as a basis for evaluating my policy making in continuing education. I felt that as an adult education director concerned about improvements in teaching as a way to upgrade program quality I needed to find a means of evaluating any changes made in faculty selection in order to put my hunches and assumptions to the test.

METHODS

With the backing of the Provost, I developed and implemented at Stony Brook a new way of hiring continuing education faculty for credit courses that was

departmentally based. Previously, the continuing education unit engaged its faculty directly because the academic departments were largely not interested in participating in the continuing education program. Although hiring decisions that were made under this system were evaluated by an interdepartmental committee drawn from the faculty, there was a widely shared opinion that this approach was not as effective as one emanating directly from the departments. As a consequence, the continuing education program relied heavily on adjunct faculty who were not affiliated with any campus department.

In reaction to the absence of departmental participation in faculty hiring for continuing education, I transferred the responsibility back to the academic departments with the Provost's backing. I also made available a $2,400 allocation for every continuing education course offered by each department, regardless of whether the course was taught by a full time faculty member as part of their teaching load, or by adjuncts that the department would hire and supervise. This new approach to working with the departments was labelled the "CED Incentive Plan." The Provost approved moving in this new direction since he was also looking for a way to stimulate greater university involvement in the continuing education

program as a means of attracting more tuition paying, part-time, adult students to the campus.

ASSESSMENTS AND OUTCOMES

Scheduling Data

By counting the number of courses offered each semester a measure of the scale and vitality of the continuing education program on campus is thereby obtained. In the two years the new program has been in effect, the number of graduate credit courses offered has risen from 45 in the Spring of 1987, the semester just prior to the Incentive Plan, to 89 in the fall of 1990 - a ceiling established by funding constraints imposed upon the continuing education program. These courses were all administered directly by the university departments who took responsibility for the hiring decisions of full time and adjunct faculty.

Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET) Data

SET data are obtained at Stony Brook through questionnaires distributed by faculty in their credit courses. The evaluation instrument was developed by a university committee and has sixteen scaled questions including "The instructor's presentations were interesting," "I learned a great deal in this course," "I would recommend this course to other students", etc.

The responses for each item could range from "1," Strongly Agree to "7," Strongly Disagree. The data are collected by the campus Office of Institutional Studies where tabulations are performed, determining mean scores for every item for each course participating in the survey. The participation rate for School of Continuing Education students has risen from 52% for the three terms prior to the Incentive Plan, to 61% in the three terms following the introduction of the new policy.

Table 1 shows the mean value for item 15, "I would recommend this course to other students." This is generally regarded as the single most revealing question on SET instruments. The mean score for the three semesters prior to the change equalled 2.38. In the three semesters following the new hiring plan the average equalled 2.27, showing a slight improvement for continuing education courses. Comparing all university totals for the same six terms shows that there was no change, the mean scores equalled 2.51.

- -

Table 1 Here

- -

Verified Anecdotal Evidence

Following every semester I reviewed each department's continuing education SET data highlighting examples of

excellent and poor evaluations which I then shared with each chair. As a consequence, two department chairs mentioned to me that they had used the data in making hiring decisions affecting continuing education courses in situations where I had noted poor teaching. I subsequently was able to verify that these staffing decisions were actually made. These chairs pointed out to me that were the Incentive Plan not in effect they would not have been motivated to replace faculty who were evaluated poorly.

Commissioned Survey

In the Spring of 1989 a commissioned survey was conducted by the Institute for Social Analysis, (ISA), SUNY Stony Brook at my request. The ISA is a university based research bureau in the social sciences that performs a full range of sponsored research. This project was designed to assess the perceptions of the School of Continuing Education among key decision makers on campus. Participants, who included both faculty and administrators were guaranteed confidentiality.

The data revealed a generally held view that the adult education program had undergone improvement. Several of the participants admitted that lingering negative impressions were based upon their knowledge of past

experience with continuing education rather than present. Interestingly, a greater positive impression was held by key decision makers newer to the campus. They were less likely to be influenced by a knowledge of past practices and their perceptions more accurately reflected a clearer appreciation of the present situation.

The importance of this survey is that it can be interpreted as an overall measure of the attitude towards continuing education held by those within the institution who are likely to be in a position to make decisions affecting the resources available to the unit. The data also convey how some opinions are shaped by history and exhibit a resistance to change.

University Senate Survey

In Spring 1989 the University Senate Standing Committee on Administrative Review polled faculty and professional staff members on campus to determine their perceptions of various administrative offices. The School of Continuing Education received the highest scores among all campus offices on questions pertaining to the deployment of resources and the development of new resources. This amounted to a ringing endorsement of the CED Incentive Plan.

SUMMARY

Five kinds of assessment measures were used in casual but effective ways to determine whether or not improvements took place in Stony Brook's continuing education program as a result of implementing a new plan to hire faculty which emphasized departmental control. Each assessment measure suggested either an improvement or a positive perception of the unit. Following the change in hiring and the incentive program, there was an increase in the number of courses scheduled, in student evaluations of teaching showing better scores, and in anecdotal information that suggested that department chairs were paying heed to poor teaching evaluations brought to their attention. Additional improvements were indicated on a commissioned survey that showed a change in perspective among key decision makers, and in a campus poll reflecting favorable responses to the new initiatives.

My own experience convinces me that adult education directors can analyze the outcomes of changes they introduce in their programs. Subjecting policy making to this type of analysis is beneficial because it reinforces for directors an understanding of the dynamics which contribute to institutional perceptions of success. In the case of the adult education program at Stony Brook, the improved sense of quality has had a visible impact in

several different dimensions. Support for the unit is higher within both administrative and academic sectors. Resources available to the school have increased despite an overall environment of campus austerity. Within the adult education unit morale is improved, and many new projects have been undertaken with confidence. The ability to generate new courses and projects has resulted in higher registrations. In the light of successful achievements that have enhanced its credibility, the School of Continuing Education does not feel as vulnerable to criticism and is better able to deal optimistically with future challenges.

REFERENCES

Apps, J. W. (1985) Improving practice in continuing education. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

Freedman, L. (1987) Quality in continuing education. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Rachal, J. (1986). Assessing adult education research questions: Some preliminary criteria. Adult Education, 36 (3), 157-159.

Table 1

Mean Student Ratings for
Continuing Education Course Instructors
X Values

Totals	School of Continuing Education Students	University
Spring 86 through Spring 87	2.38	2.51
Fall 87 through Fall 88	2.27	2.51

* The scale values ranged from 1 - 7 with 1 indicating the highest rating.